

Find your truth. Face your truth.  
Speak your truth.

The  
Leading  
Edge  
of Now

MARCI LYN CURTIS

*Sometimes I think Dad knew what happened to me that Labor Day weekend and that was why he had a heart attack — it literally broke his heart.*

Just when Grace is beginning to get used to being an orphan, her estranged uncle suddenly comes forward to claim her. That might be okay if he'd spoken to her even once since her father died. Or if moving in with Uncle Rusty didn't mean returning to New Harbor.

Grace spent the best summers of her life in New Harbor. But now the place just reminds her of all she's lost: her best friend, her boyfriend and any memory of the night that changed her forever.

People say the truth will set you free, but Grace isn't so sure about that. Because once she starts looking for it, the truth is hard to find. And what happens when her healing hurts the people she cares about the most?

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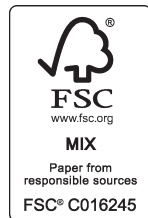
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*For the strong, the kind and the compassionate —  
the gentlemen in my life. Paul, Talon, Blaise and Merle.*





# One

Here I am.

Standing at the base of Rusty's front porch, where I've been for probably a full minute, trying to find the courage to move. Over the past couple of years, I keep having moments like these, where I come to a sudden halt, look around and ask myself, *Grace Cochran, what were you thinking?*

The answer is always the same. I was not thinking.

Sarah, my caseworker from social services, is beside me, watching carefully. Back in the day, she was a Troubled Teen on Drugs, but then she went to rehab and cleaned up and found God and etcetera, and now she's trying to make the world better, one troubled orphan at a time. Which probably explains why she's looking at me as though I might spontaneously combust. Having once been a Troubled Teen, she's in tune with such things. "Take your time," Sarah says. "It's probably a little overwhelming for you, coming back to your uncle's."

"You have no idea," I say.

*Marci Lyn Curtis*

Which is absolutely true.

If Sarah knew what had happened the last time I set foot in New Harbor, she wouldn't be so keen on carting me back here right now.

My heart races in my ears. The instinct to run is sharp and physical, as if some lunatic is coming at me with a knife. I close my eyes for a beat, trying to reel myself back in. Rusty is family, the only blood relative I have left, so as screwed up as it is, I belong here. This place is home — or as close to home as I can have right now. I breathe in deeply and drag my suitcase up the porch steps, both my bravery and my feet stopping before I get to the door.

Sarah clears her throat, glancing at Rusty's house and then back at me. I have the distinct impression that psychoanalysis is about to occur, so I busy myself by idly swatting away a mosquito. Sarah starts in anyway. "I'm sure you'll fall into a routine here. Reacquaint yourself with your uncle. Rekindle some old friendships." She pauses for a moment, waiting for me to reply.

I do not. I'd sooner talk about how sausage is made.

"Your uncle tells me you have an old friend here," she goes on in a low voice, and then she elbows me, just barely. "Even a boyfriend, at some point?"

And just like that, my lungs start closing up. I can feel my pulse banging in my ears, my fingertips, the backs of my knees. I imagine a field of sunflowers — something my therapist told me to do when I feel like I'm losing control.

It doesn't help.

Slowly, methodically, like I just bought my mouth and I'm not yet sure how to use it, I say, "Owen and I were together for,

## *The Leading Edge of Now*

like, a few months. We broke up, and I haven't spoken to him since." Looking down at my hands, which are knotted together in a white-knuckled clamp, I talk myself down. Everything's going to be fine. Owen has already graduated from high school, so he'll be heading off to college at the end of the summer. All I need to do is avoid him for a couple of months. I can do that, can't I?

Sunflowers.

Heaps of sunflowers.

The freaking planet, covered in sunflowers.

"Did I say something to upset you?" Sarah asks.

"It's just — I don't know," I say quietly, working to keep my voice calm. "It's everything, I guess. I'm finding it kind of overwhelming, being here."

"Look," Sarah whispers, her eyes on mine, steady and firm, "I know you're upset with your uncle for leaving you in foster care for so long. I get that. But you need to understand that this is a big change for Rusty, and it's better that he took his time and made sure it's the right decision. It was the responsible thing to do."

With great effort, I restrain a snort. The last time Rusty was a responsible human being was never. His brain is a tossed salad of Michelob, Cheetos and nearly half a century of adolescence. So I don't reply to Sarah. I just let out a loud exhale.

Sarah stares at me for a tick. She's probably only five-two, but the way she carries herself makes her appear six feet tall. "You've got this, Grace," she says, loudly enough that I wince, and before I can stop her or say anything else, she steps forward and rings the doorbell.

Footsteps clomp through the house.

*Marci Lyn Curtis*

Oh, God.

I try to breathe. In through the nose and out through the mouth. In through the nose and out through the mouth. In through the nose and out through the —

Rusty throws open the door in a grand, animated gesture, like he's presenting himself onstage. He was a singer, way back when, and he never quite adjusted to life without performance. "Grace!" he hollers, his voice, as always, several decibels too loud.

I don't know what I was expecting. Red-rimmed eyes or pale skin or a guilty tilt to his brows, maybe. Or some other tangible evidence that the past couple of years have been as hard on him as they've been on me. But Rusty hasn't changed one bit. He's still all lopsided grin and cowboy hat and exuberance. He launches himself over the threshold and crushes me in his arms, holding me hostage for several breaths. He smells just as he always has, like Old Spice deodorant and cigars and the first few days of summer. Pulling away, he holds me at arm's length. "Holy hell, G, you look great!"

Anxiety and panic sear my stomach, even though I know there was a time that I felt as safe with Rusty as I had with my own father. "Thanks," I say, backing out of his grip, the word coming out pricklier than anticipated.

His smile falls, just barely. Which should make me feel vindicated. But the fact is, Rusty's smile used to be one of my favorite things, back when I had favorite things.

We stare at each other. We breathe. He shifts his weight. Sidestepping the awkwardness, Rusty turns to Sarah. "Ma'am," he says. He tips his hat and winks, his trademark move with the ladies. His fourth wife called it charming.

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But, Sarah, she just gives him a curt nod.

Silence.

I clear my throat. “Right,” I say finally, wiping my palms on my clothes and doing my best to smile like a seventeen-year-old whose entire life hasn’t been jerked out from underneath her. “So I’ll just ...” I gesture to the doorway, which Rusty is mostly blocking. My big idea to get past him is to step around him a little. Like we’re chess pieces: he’s a knight and he can’t move to my square. But he wraps a meaty arm around me and half squeezes, half drags me into the living room, where he and Sarah talk “guardianship” and “custody” and “rules and regulations,” during which I do not open my mouth or form a syllable or communicate in any way.

I was afraid that — after everything that happened the last time I was here, after Dad’s death, after my two-year absence — Rusty’s house might’ve drastically changed. But it still looks the same, like it’s never been formally introduced to the new millennium, all avocado-green appliances and outdated couches and dusty, taxidermized animal heads. In the kitchen, the edge of which is just visible from my perch, I see the ancient wooden table that’s always functioned as a landing strip for unopened mail, car keys, beach towels and Solo cups. Rusty would clear it all to the side in the evenings — with a giant swipe of the back of his forearm — to make room for boisterous, legendary games of Spades. My gaze roams back to the living room, to a picture of Dad and me on Thanksgiving, several years back. To a framed invitation to my eighth-grade violin recital. And, most notably, to the lucky bamboo plant Dad gave Rusty.

A sudden pang pierces the hollow of my chest. I blink a couple of times. My vision blurs and clears. Dad was ridiculously

superstitious. I used to find St. Christopher statues wedged in his glove box and sand dollars dotting the house. I was gifted with rabbit's-foot keychains, lucky-penny clocks and horse-shoes in all colors and sizes. This bamboo plant — it was Dad's Christmas gift to Rusty a few years ago. Currently, it's sitting on a small, round table by the front door, looking droopy and ignored. "Have you been watering that?" I blurt, pointing to the plant. There are so many questions I should've asked Rusty — Why did it take you two years to sign my guardianship papers? Why didn't you come to Dad's funeral? Why haven't you even *called* me? — and yet here I've opened by grilling him on his horticultural skills.

Rusty leans back on the couch, kicking his legs out in front of him and crossing them at the ankle. His smile is back full-force, and the entire living room seems brighter because of it. "Huh? The bamboo?" He peels off his hat and scratches his head, nearly taking out a lamp in the process. "Yeah. Of course I water it. Every other week, I s'pose? Once a month?"

And the state of Florida thinks it's a good idea to leave me in his care.

Still, though, Sarah is serious and respectful as she hands several papers to Rusty, who holds them out as far as his arm will allow, squinting. He needs glasses, but he's always despised wearing them. Most people look ridiculous when they squint. Rusty just looks more like Rusty. And as I sit there, watching him read the guidelines for my care, I realize just how much I've missed him over the past couple of years. But then Sarah says something to him, and he laughs, full and rich, like things are completely normal, and I think about all those nights I spent in foster care. Like a reflex, I turn away from him.



# Acknowledgments

*The Leading Edge of Now* is a story I was compelled to write, a story that grew out of a painful experience in my past. And while my circumstances were vastly different from Grace's, the feelings were the same, so please understand that this book carries a little bit of my heart.

That being said, writing this story was a lot like jumping off a cliff. The second my feet left the ground, I was praying, hyperventilating, imagining my own demise, screaming, laughing, crying, wishing I didn't eat those nachos for lunch. It was the best thing I've ever done. But also, it was the most terrifying thing I've ever done. And there was a huge, magnificent cast of hundreds who were either brave enough or foolish enough to grab my hand and leap along with me. While I'd love to thank all of you by name, space doesn't permit, so please forgive me for keeping this brief.

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And as always, thank you to my readers worldwide. I count my blessings every day because of you. I love you epically and infinitely, and am so very thankful to be trusted with your hearts.

Lastly, I'm most appreciative to the one in six — *the one in six* of you who have experienced sexual assault in your lifetime. It means more than I can say that you read this story, because I wrote it for you. Please remember that you are survivors, that you are not alone, that you are not to blame.

The past is in the past. Go live your Now.

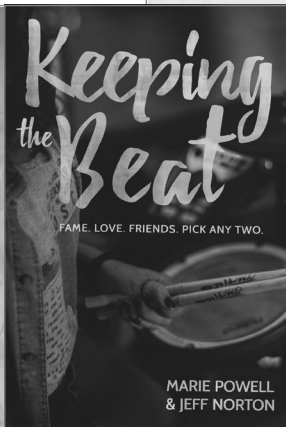
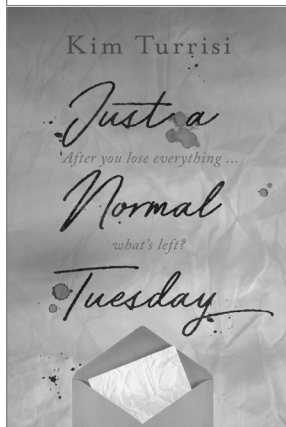
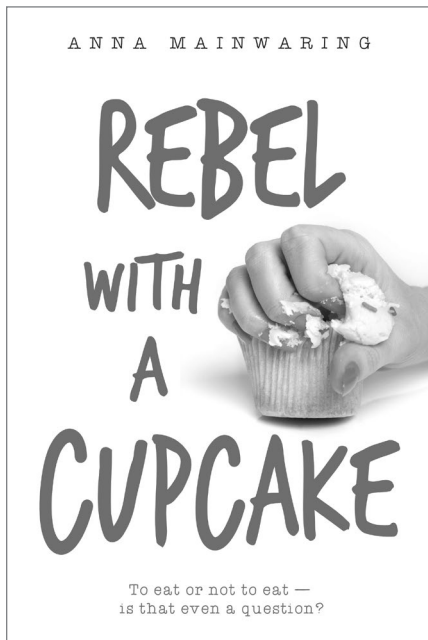
## *Author's Note*

The statistics of sexual assault are extremely alarming. According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization:

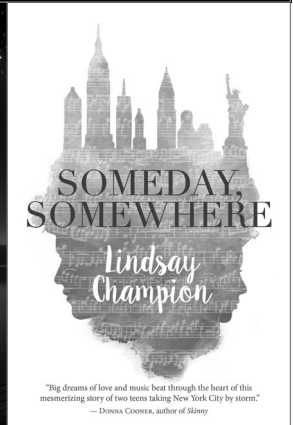
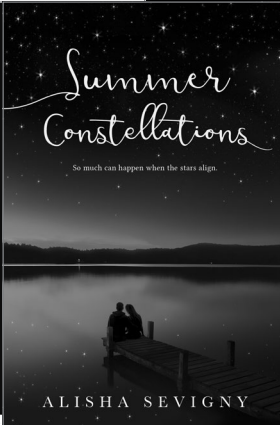
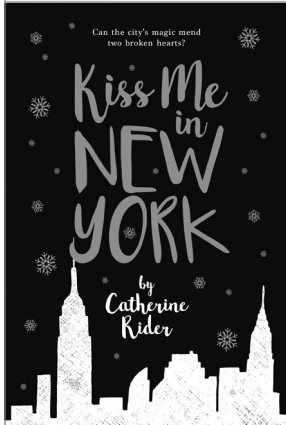
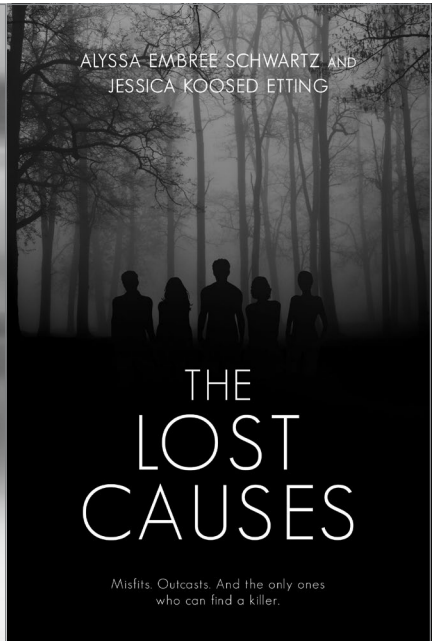
- women the ages of 16–19 are four times more likely than the general population to suffer sexual assault
- one out of every six women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime
- every 98 seconds, someone experiences sexual assault
- seven in ten rapes are committed by someone the victim knows
- two out of three rapes go unreported

If you are a victim of sexual assault, please reach out. There are so many resources waiting for you. The National Sexual Assault Hotline is always ready for your call: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest sexual violence center, and it offers help in every way at [www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org). NSVRC (National Sexual Violence Resource Center) offers a breakdown of resources by state at [www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org).

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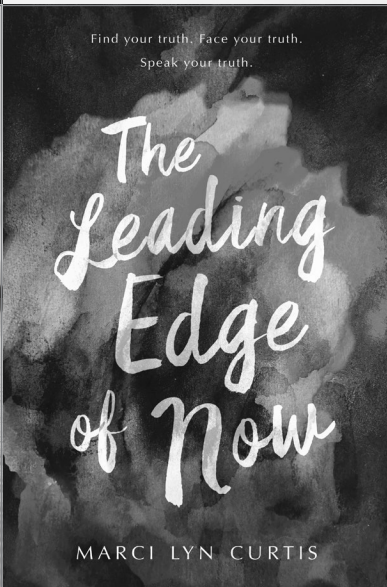
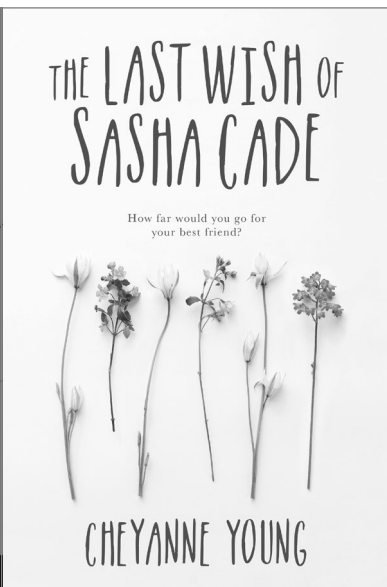
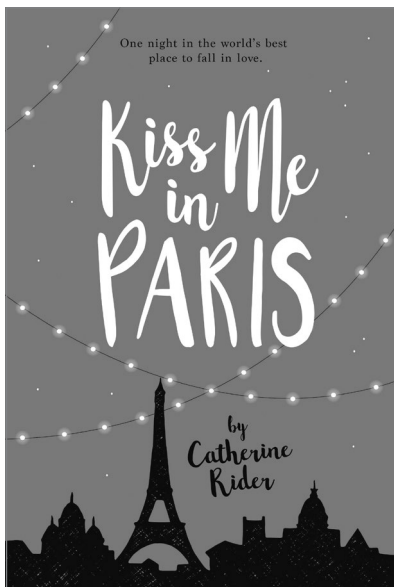


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